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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses concerns about boys and literacy in Australia. The paper notes that boys appear to be behind girls on most measures, and there are also differences between social and cultural groups--therefore, boys in high socio-economic groups outperform girls from industrial and some rural areas. It notes that girls from each area outperform the boys. The paper explains that such a pattern leaves boys, especially boys from the Aboriginal population, most at risk in Australian educational institutions while showing patterns of inequity across the whole system. The paper discusses issues of equity and difference in educational outcomes using examples like inappropriate assessment measures to suggest how boys may be discriminated against in the context. It argues for participation rights in relation to linguistic and cultural representation within the school institution; such representation has a potential to have a transformative effect on schools at the social level. (Contains 24 references.) (NKA)

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Introduction

This paper addresses concerns about boys and literacy in Australia. Boys appear to be behind girls on most measures (Masters, 1997) and there are also differences between social and cultural groups. Therefore, boys in high socio-economic groups outperform girls from industrial and some rural areas. Girls from each area outperform the boys (Milburn, 2000). Such a pattern leaves boys, especially boys from the Aboriginal population, most at risk in our educational institutions whilst showing patterns of inequity across the whole system. The paper discusses issues of equity and difference in educational outcomes using examples like inappropriate assessment measures to suggest how boys may be discriminated against in the context.

The context

Certain groups of children can be identified as more at risk within the education system. For example, there has been much attention paid to boys and literacy in Australia in the past few years (eg. Baker & Davies, 1993; Arndt, 2000; Teese, 2000). In 2000 the Australian Parliament Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations set up an "Inquiry into the education of boys". However, the approach taken to this issue would appear to encourage the maintenance of patterns of disadvantage and in many cases policy and practice has actively supported the divide that exists between the advantaged and disadvantaged in the schooling system. If schools are to best serve the community there needs to be a redefining of literacy and participation rights afforded children. This latter would mean developing systems that can value a diversity of linguistic and cultural capital and meet the educational needs of all.

Boys and literacy - which boys

There is a familiarity in the underlying factors effecting literacy outcomes and in the beliefs and attitudes that underpin present practice. Factors influencing the educational outcomes of boys in Australian education programs include economic,

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cultural, social and ethnic factors. Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island boys are the most discriminated against through poverty, ethnicity, culture and also systematically within the education and legal structures of the states and territories. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, MCEETYA, has declared educational equality for Australia's Indigenous population an urgent national priority (2000).

In 1994 the NSW Government Advisory Committee, in a report on boy's education, highlighted the need for a gender equity strategy that would include programs for boys as well as for girls. The committee found that boys were disadvantaged through gender stereotyping and this disadvantage would continue unless attitudes and expectations within the system changed. Gender stereotyping was also recorded as creating additional problems for school children from certain groups. The groups identified were Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander children, children with learning difficulties, those living in poverty, isolated rural children and those from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The literature on boys and literacy (eg. NSW Government Advisory Committee, 1994; Victorian LAP test, 1997; Kleinfeld, 1998; de Woolfson, 1999; D'Arcangelo, 1999; Eliot, 1999; Arndt, 2000; Teese, 2000; Spear-Swerling, 2000) indicate that the issue of boys in education has become the subject of major studies in Australia, New Zealand, England and America (eg. Arnot, Gray, James, Ruddock &Duveen, 1998; DETYA, 1999; Education Review Office, 1999). In Australia boys do not perform as well at reading and writing tasks in years 3 and 7 (Victorian LAP tests 1997), have a lower retention rate in year 12 and make up the majority numbers in programs like "Reading Recovery". Boys are more likely to be diagnosed with problems. A growing number of boys are being labelled as suffering emotional, behavioural or learning problems. Many of these are treated with prescribed drugs. The issues are complex and involve social images of children, societal expectations and the developmental needs of boys from diverse backgrounds.

Gender differences in educational outcomes exist even if there is little difference in potential. The patterns of disadvantage revolve around social and emotional circumstances as well as test results. Social images of boys have a detrimental effect on attitudes towards boys and expectations of their abilities. For many children problems of disadvantage can be traced back to the distance between their life experience and the world of institutionalised education and valued knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This becomes a question of the interface of subjective experience and curriculum form and content. What are the classroom and curriculum dynamics that portend relative fit between curriculum and life experience? In an age where children are more supervised and tested than ever before assessment has become a curriculum driver.

Curriculum, assessment and standards

Bruner (1996), in a discussion on curriculum, assessment and standards, commented on the curriculum reform movement of the late 1960s and 1970s and contrasted these to the 1990s. He described the curriculum debates of the 1990s as being "assessment reform" (p.116). Whilst not disagreeing with attempts to improve measuring instruments that will help indicate how children are performing in learning tasks and

assist teachers in evaluating their practice Bruner also saw the limitations of such measures.

An example of the limitations of such measures and of present practice and initiatives can be seen in the educational strategies of the state government in Victoria. The Labor government achieved office, after many years in opposition, coming into power on a promise of rebuilding the ailing health and education systems. After only months in office the Minister of Education announced a new program. This initiative was the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM). Developed by the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) and the Board of Studies the AIM has five areas of focus. These areas are classroom assessment, homework, reporting of results, a learning improvement program to improve student literacy and numeracy and statewide testing.

Homework and classroom, state and national, assessment have become ideological beacons in the 1990s. Measures like the AIM suggest the trend is increasing. State and national literacy standards and benchmarks are reported as if this is a giant competition. Children identified with difficulties, mostly boys, are catered for through remedial programs like "Reading Recovery". This is the most popular and widespread remedial reading program in Australia. The data available from these intervention programs is not comprehensive enough to defend the practice. Apart from the limited view of reading that is taken in the program (Landis, 1997) there are other aspects of this approach that can be perceived as open to bias. These include the children selected to be "recovered" and how effective the "recovery" is.

Literacy programs

A longitudinal study in America followed 400 five-year-old girls and boys through school in order to research differences between girls and boys ability to learn to read (D'Arcangelo, 1999). The children were tested in numeracy and literacy annually and researchers found no difference between the girls and boys reading scores. A disquietening factor that did emerge was that boys were four times more likely to be identified as having reading problems than girls. What the data revealed was that the teachers used behavioural criteria for selecting children for further evaluation. Boys' behaviour made them more noticeable and the quieter girls might not be reading but were not identified as having problems (D'Arcangelo, 1999). Landis comments:

> To say students are selected on the basis of teacher judgment does little to change the fact that how teachers perceive students attitudes/displays of cooperation towards school-related tasks represents a powerful influence upon reasons why students are placed in special (eg remedial as well as advanced) academic programs (1997, p. 3).

That the girls not in special programs did better than the boys who had initially had the same scores was another issue. Programs like "Reading Recovery" are expensive. There are studies that indicate that the groups that need help the most are less likely to have successful experiences. Goldenberg (1995) reports that in New Zealand, where "Reading Recovery" was developed, classroom literacy instruction has not solved the problem of disproportionate underachievement by low-income, non-white minorities

(1995, p. 105). Such a pattern also exists in America where children from low income, inner city, populations are on average performing on the 20th percentile on national norm-referenced measures for literacy (Grossen, Coulter & Ruggles, 1997). If programs like "Reading Recovery" are least effective in the lowest performing schools then this creates serious questions about equity and raises questions about this type of intervention as a strategy to raise literacy levels.

Language and diversity

Another issue of equity in contemporary Australia is cultural and linguistic diversity.

> The most recent census recorded 3.9 million residents had been born overseas in one of 200 countries. A further 3.8 million Australians had one or both parents born overseas. In Australia currently 282 major languages (including 170 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) languages are spoken (Press & Hayes, 2000).

However, educational institutions do not reflect this diversity. At a time when the advantages of bi and multi-lingualism are being explored from a point of view of cognitive development and self-identity mono-lingualism is still the norm. Worse, many children "lose", or choose to lose, languages other than English that they possess. It is not unusual for children to grow up unable to communicate with grandparents, cousins and other members of their extended families.

This issue of English, and a certain type of English, having hegemony in Australian schools is difficult to contest at a time when English is becoming the accepted global language (Kehi, 1999). However, the issue is not whether children should learn English but how and when and what models should be accessible. If models and strategies are used that are inherently inequitable then some children, families and communities will be at risk. The diversity of the population and the push towards state and national standards, testing and assessment takes autonomy away from the teacher and the school, is not inclusive and the curriculum is less likely to be organised to be relevant to the lived experience of many of the participants. The Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework 11 (CSF 11), introduced in 2000, is an example. In a critique of the English (and literacy) CSF 11 document Tylee (2001) identifies the foundation orientation of the framework as being vocational/neo-classical and a product of the "back to basics" movement that aims to prepare children for the workforce. (p. 3). Such an approach is top down, standards for skills and knowledge are externally specified and proponents claim the education supplied meets the needs of the wider society. Attempts to superimpose a more socially critical approach Tylee discusses as problematic.

As young children enter educational settings they bring differing experiences with them, different languages and ways of using language. This new context will influence how children perceive themselves, their families and their community. The values, attitudes and beliefs of this setting reflect, for the child, how the wider community views the child. This wider community has rigid expectations. The CSF links the learning outcomes and indicators to behavioural objectives which are monitored against predetermined standards. Literacy levels are tested in relation to

acquired skills. Indicators and identified skills at particular levels are nationally benchmarked.

Such a curriculum approach immediately has the potential to disadvantage many groups. Children coming from homes where English is not spoken, children coming from homes where standard English is not their experience, many Indigenous children come from complex language backgrounds and boys reading and writing achievements are statistically lower than girls in standardised assessment procedures from the earliest years.

How can a classroom take account of history and experience? How can the inclusive classroom be achieved? One way would be by acknowledging difference and giving legitimacy to difference by making cultural, linguistic, socio/economic and gender diversity visible in the classroom. An example would be teachers who not only come from diverse language backgrounds but also model diversity of language use. Children do not encounter variants of English in the classroom even though, for many, variants of English are used and experienced in the home and community. Bi-lingual teachers use standard English in the classroom. If Anglo-Celtic use of English is taken as standard English then children from an Anglo-Celtic background have limited opportunities to experience language use that reflects the wider Australian community. Other children do not necessarily see their lives and their families represented in an "Australian" classroom.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed boys and literacy with an underlying theme relating to policy, practice, societal beliefs and prejudices. Many groups are identified within our schools as being at risk. One group, the boys, make up almost half the school population. Other groups, like Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island children, are small. In both cases educational programs have not successfully addressed needs. Many practices have long histories and motivations for such strategies could be claimed to be more ideological than a result of research. Assessment, testing and narrow views of language and literacy can be seen to have dual possibilities. They can indicate accountability or be used as strategies that create disadvantage. The paper also argues for participation rights in relation to linguistic and cultural representation within the school institution. Such representation has a potential to have a transformative effect on schools at the social level.

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